

**You're not alone.  
We're here to support.**

There is no timeline for grief. Knowing there are supports and resources available can give hope as you move through your grief.

# Grief

## Normative Grief

After the death of a loved one, our grief is felt in multiple ways. The process of grief depends on many factors: The type of death (anticipated vs. sudden or traumatic), nature of the relationship with the deceased (close or connected vs. acquaintance or strained), age of the deceased (child vs. elderly), and your own coping styles (stress tolerance and how you managed it).



### Emotional

- **Sadness:** Can occur without warning; intense at times.
- **Shock, Numbness, Denial:** Protective coping mechanisms that occur naturally, as the feelings and pain connected to loss would be too overwhelming to process all at once.
- **Relief, Release:** Experienced when death occurs after a long illness, or someone who the griever has had a difficult relationship with has died.
- **Anger:** Can be expressed as irritability, a way of protesting about what has happened.
- **Fear, Anxiety, Panic:** May question if you will feel "normal" again, worrying about the future, heightened sense of one's own death.
- **Guilt:** For things left unspoken or things said; things done, not done in time or not done at all. Grievers tend to forget all that was done and said.



### Physical

- Tightness in throat or chest.
- Shortness of breath.
- Fatigue, exhaustion.
- Headaches, stomachaches/stomach concerns.
- Muscle tension or weakness.
- Oversensitivity to noise.
- **Sleep Changes:** Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or oversleeping.
- **Appetite Changes:** Overeating or undereating.



### Mind Health (Cognitive)

- **Preoccupation:** With thoughts of the deceased and circumstances surrounding the death.
- Forgetfulness.
- Poor concentration.



### Behavioural Changes

(Things that could be noticed by others).

- Lack of interest in previously enjoyed activities.
- Difficulty completing typical activities or routines.
- Lack of initiative or motivation.
- Restlessness or overactivity.



### Social

- **Withdrawal from Social Relationships:** Some may need to withdraw to process what has happened.
- **Loneliness:** Often feeling isolated in your grief.



### Spiritual

- **Challenging Faith:** Anger at God or Higher Power.
- **Strengthened Faith:** Becomes or continues to be a source of strength and comfort.
- Searching for meaning of life and/or death.



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# Complicated Grief

Everyone will experience feelings of grief and loss throughout their life. Grief will present differently for each person; reactions to grief being unique, based on an individual's personality and the relationship they had with the person who died.

Grief may feel distressing and overwhelming initially for most, however, the weight of grief typically softens, providing longer periods of relief as time moves on.

In cases where **complicated grief** is experienced, the initial intensity of grief remains consistent, slowing or even halting a person's healing. In these situations, individuals experience **intense feelings of grief for longer than 6 months** after the death of their loved one **or** experience extreme difficulties with day-to-day functioning (completion of tasks), which can negatively impact their personal health and/or safety.

## How Grief Affects You

### Cognitive Mind Health

Difficulty with Memory, Focus, Motivation

### Spiritual

May Challenge, Strengthen, or Enhance Faith

### Emotional

Shock, Numbness, Denial, Crying, Fear, Anger, Longing

### Physical

Sleeping/Eating Disturbances, Headaches, Fatigue

### Social

Loneliness, Withdrawal, Isolation, Change

## Possible Risk Factors for Complicated Grief:



### Type of Death

- **Sudden Unexpected Death:** Accidental, homicide, suicide, sudden illness, military death.
- Death of a child, adolescent, or young adult.
- Uncertainty surrounding death (i.e. Did my loved one suffer? Why did this occur? What was the cause of death? This can happen in cases of suicide and homicide deaths).
- Griever was physically distanced from the death (out of country or unable to travel to loved one).
- **Adapting to Multiple Losses:**  
*Person(s):* In cases of multiple deaths in a short period of time or loss of other relationships.  
*Things:* Loss of job, loss of home, etc.



### Complicated Grief May Be Impacted By:

#### Health and History

- Caregiving for a chronically ill individual.
- Physical health-related concerns are present (chronic or acute illness, disability, or injury).
- There is a personal history of trauma and/or abusive relationships.
- Currently experiencing or has a history of mental health-related concerns (mood or anxiety-related disorders, substance use disorder, etc.).



#### Relationship to Loved One

- Codependent or you were extremely dependent on the person who died.
- Strained or conflictual.
- Not recognized by others (disfranchised relationship).



#### Feelings

- Intense and continuous longing or yearning for your loved one.
- Difficulty managing painful emotions and/or making attempts to avoid emotions.
- Intense and persistent feelings of pain, self-blame, anger, guilt, shame, denial, or numbness.
- Low self-compassion.
- Difficulties in emotionally accepting the loss.
- Feeling hopeless or that life now has no purpose.



### Behaviours

- Avoiding places your loved one visited or had enjoyed.
- Reduction or avoidance of previously enjoyed activities.
- Confusion about your new role in life or unwillingness to adjust to change.
- Decreased ability or inability to care for self.
- Increase in high risk-taking activities.
- Self-medicating and/or increased substance use (alcohol, drugs, misuse of prescribed medication).
- Suicidal behaviours and/or physically harming self.



### Thinking

- Persistent (constant) thoughts of your loved one and your loss.
- Consistent and intense thoughts about the past and/or inability to think about your future.
- Purposely trying to avoid thinking about the death, or your loved one who died.
- "What if" thoughts present, accompanied by feelings of guilt, regret and shame.
- Suicidal thoughts.



### Social

- Limited or no social supports.
- Difficulty trusting others.
- Isolating or withdrawing from others.
- Being blamed by others for the illness or death.
- Loss of employment or financial strain.

## Realistic Expectations During Grief

1. Your grief will not follow a set step-by-step process. Your grief will be based on your own personal needs at different points in time.
2. Your grief will involve a wide variety of different thoughts and feelings.
3. Your grief can impact you in all five realms of experience:
  - Emotional
  - Physical
  - Cognitive (Mind Health) – *Thinking, Problem Solving, Information Processing, Motivation, Memory*
  - Social
  - Spiritual
4. You need to feel it to heal it.
5. Your grief will probably hurt more, before it hurts less.
6. You do not "get over" your grief; you learn to live with it.
7. You need other people to help you through grief.
8. You will not always feel this bad.



Grief is a personal journey for each individual and although there is no set timeline for grief, if you or someone you know is struggling in grief, it is important to **reach out to others for help**.

If support cannot be found within your personal network of family or friends, you might find that you can relate better to others who share similar experiences. **No one should have to grieve alone.**

If you are unsure of the supports available to you, speak with your primary care provider or contact your local Canadian Mental Health Association Branch.

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